

interview

Palestine/Israel conflict: Willing the impossible

Thursday 8 August 2013, by [BUTLER Judith](#), [FILAR Ray](#) (Date first published: 23 July 2013).

In politics, sometimes the thing that will never happen actually starts to happen, preparing the ground for transformation. Judith Butler on the Israel/Palestine conflict and her recent book *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*.

By now, Judith Butler is used to improbable accusations. Among other things, she has been called a “useful idiot” for anti-Semites, a supporter of terrorism and – that old classic – a self-hating Jew.

These kinds of allegations are rarely levelled against post-structuralist philosophers. Yet the Maxine Elliot professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of California [\[1\]](#) holds a special kind of renown within the academy. Her work on conflict, gender and the nation-state has dramatically transformed the way we think about society.

And unlike most other theorists, she also publically advocates for the delicate, deeply contentious standpoint of the anti-Zionist Jew. Because of this, Butler’s every public move is scrutinised and dogged by censure. Her talk in February 2013 at Brooklyn College on the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement [\[2\]](#) met a particularly vociferous backlash. The stress, Butler tells me, led her to cancel speaking for a season.

Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism [\[3\]](#) is Butler’s response to those who would place anti-Zionism outside of the acceptable bounds of Jewish speech. With American secretary of state John Kerry’s [\[4\]](#) attempt to revive the two-state solution in Israel/Palestine underway, *Parting Ways* questions what kinds of solutions are up for discussion. Challenging the prevailing poverty of vision, Butler instead offers an ethical system that holds relationships with the other at the heart of what it means to be Jewish.

Arguing for a form of binationalism [\[5\]](#), she suggests that a move from “segregation” to “cohabitation” – however ambivalent or fractious – is a better ethical approach to Israel/Palestine. The radical transformation she calls for works from society to self and back again: any genuine cohabitation necessitates a personal and societal shift in the treatment of marginalised populations.

This is no romanticised solution. “People who expect enmity to suddenly convert into love are probably using the wrong model,” Butler says, “living with one another can be unhappy, wretched, ambivalent, even full of antagonism, but all of that can play out in the political sphere without recourse to expulsion or genocide. And that is our obligation.”

When we meet, Butler seems tired. The position she holds is difficult and vulnerable to wilful

misrepresentation. The professor who has described herself as a “self conscious intellectual standing on the sidelines” has nevertheless stepped into the political firing lines of one of the most critical conflicts of our time.

Ray Filar: In the introduction to Parting Ways you say, tantalisingly, that of course you have a personal story, a family history of loss under the Nazi regime, and maybe you’d explore that somewhere but it’s not relevant for here. Why not?

Judith Butler: Well it’s a problem. I don’t have a Jewish last name, but that’s because of whatever happened in immigration. My mother’s family were killed in Hungary in the early 1940s and I grew up with that knowledge and with a fair amount of traumatic overflow into my family of origin. On the one hand I say that and it gives me credibility, like, oh she’s a Jew, she actually grew up Jewish, she’s actually, you know, a second-generation Holocaust survivor, whatever.

But should I claim that? Does that give me more legitimacy? Then that also makes me really angry. Why do I have to do that? I don’t want to market myself that way. I want my arguments to be good arguments on the basis of what I actually have to say. I do situate myself in this problem of being a Jew who doesn’t want to be represented by the state of Israel, a state that claims to represent all Jewish people and make me into a potential citizen. Which I’m sure they wouldn’t let me do now anyway.

RF: Maybe if you repented?

JB: Yes, a good conversion narrative would get me some, like, um... well we won’t go down that road. I wanted to mark it, but I don’t want to exploit it. If I haven’t marked it at all, that would also be kind of a problem. People need to know who I am and where I’m coming from.

Very often, if you just get the question: “Well, are you a Zionist?” if you say no, it’s assumed that you want the destruction of the state of Israel and that you’re involved in some actual or potential violent attack. But actually, you could say: “Not on this basis”.

I was born a Zionist, because I didn’t have a choice about that. It was the ether of my family life, but I certainly broke with it as I asked more questions about it. And that doesn’t mean I want to see the destruction of a people, it means I want to see a state structure that might embody more substantially the basic principles of democracy.

RF: Why is the theme of cohabitation such an important thread throughout the book?

JB: Some Israeli politicians have proposed the transfer of Palestinians out of what is currently called Israel, either into the occupied territories, into Jordan or out into other Arab lands, with the idea that there would be no intermixing of Palestinian and Jewish Israelis or Palestinian and Jewish communities.

But the idea of an absolute segregation is one that I find lamentable. And similarly, if you look at some of the language in the basic writings of Hamas, there is that famous call to push the Israelis into the sea. Now, I would say that most Palestinian politicians on the ground say, of course that’s not what we want, and even within Hamas there is some published debate about that claim, but until the claim is removed, it’s still noxious.

So I’m trying to think of what happens if we take expulsion off the table for everyone, and instead think about the rights of those who have been expelled already, which would include the various rights of refugees who came to Israel in the aftermath of WWII, but also those from other countries, and what rights the Palestinians have who have been dispossessed of their lands and homes.

We need a legal and political understanding of the right of the refugee, whereby no solution for one group produces a new class of refugees – you can't solve a refugee problem by producing a new, potentially greater refugee problem. As long as that is understood as a basic rule, which strikes me as logical and clear, then that would be a starting point for thinking about cohabitation.

It was Edward Said who thought that there was some hope for binationalism in the fact that, although the history of dispossession and exile for Jews is very different from the history of dispossession and exile for Palestinians, they both have recent and searing experiences which might allow them to come to a common understanding on the rights of refugees, or what it might mean to live together with resonant histories of that kind.

RF: In the middle of this discussion of cohabitation you say:

“Surely binationalism is not love, but there is, we might say, a necessary and impossible attachment that makes a mockery of identity, an ambivalence that emerges from the decentering of the nationalist ethos and that forms the basis of a permanent ethical demand.”

So there is an ethical demand that we do not choose with whom we cohabit, and also that if that produces an ambivalence, it is simply something we have to accept.

JB: That's right. People who expect enmity to suddenly convert into love are probably using the wrong model. I think what Hannah Arendt meant when she said that “we cannot choose with whom we cohabit the world” is that all of those who inhabit the world have a right to be here by virtue of their being here at all. To be here means you have a right to be here.

The point that she's making, of course, is that genocide is not a legitimate option. It's not ok to decide that an entire population has no right to live in the world. No matter whether these relationships are very proximate or very distant, there is no entitlement to expunge a population or to demean its basic humanity.

What does it mean then to live with one another? It can be unhappy, it can be wretched, it can be ambivalent, it can even be full of antagonism, but all of that can play out in the political sphere without recourse to expulsion or genocide. And that is our obligation, to stay in the sphere with whatever murderous rage we have, without acting on it.

RF: To extrapolate slightly, if the Israelis were to accept this ambivalence, it would be a transformative way of thinking for them?

JB: Well I think some of them actually do. There are ordinary spaces where people do, more or less, share neighbourhoods. In Haifa, there are whole communities that are more or less integrated. But of course that is with Palestinian Israelis who have, for the most part, accepted certain kinds of cooperative models, and also accept second-class citizenship.

We have to have a very strong criticism of modes of cooperation that entrench inequality. We want modes of cohabitation or solidarity – some call it coexistence – that seek to transform every dimension, so that we have real political and economic equality, and we have the end of occupation, and we have some reasonable way to honour the right of return.

RF: So is Parting Ways a call for transformation?

JB: I think it is. There are three basic calls that I end up making that are coming from Palestinian activists or scholars who have been working on this issue for a long time. The first is to establish a firm constitutional basis for equality for all citizens, regardless of what their religion might be, or

their ethnicity or race.

The second call is a call to end the occupation, which is illegal and an extension of a colonial project. I consider both the West Bank and Gaza to be colonised, even though Gaza is not occupied in the same way that the West Bank is. The Israeli government and military control all goods that pass in or out of that area, and they have restricted employment and building material that would allow Palestinians to rebuild homes and structures that were destroyed by bombardment.

The third call is probably the most controversial, but I do think that a lot of thought has to be given to how the right of return might be conceptualised, and how that right might be honoured, whether it's via resettlement or compensation. Some plans involve a return to areas where people have lived, not necessarily to the exact homes they lived in.

But people who have been made stateless by military occupation are entitled to repatriation, and then the question is to which state, or to what polity or area? Those who have had their goods taken away are entitled to compensation of some kind. These are basic international laws.

RF: In your final chapter you cite a Mahmoud Darwish poem that says “a possible life is one that wills the impossible.” You describe this as a paradox - could you explain it?

JB: Well, there are people who believe in realpolitik and who say: “There’s never going to be one state, there’s never going to be equality, there’s never going to be peace...don’t fool yourself. If you want to be political, get concrete and see what adjustments you can make in the current regime”.

Then I just think, ok, what would it mean if we lived in a world in which no one held out for the possibility of substantial political equality, or for a full cessation of colonial practices - if no one held out for those things because they were impossible? People do scoff when you say right of return. I was at a meeting with Palestinians and Israelis where people said: “That will never happen.” So I said, “well it will not be taken off the table.”

In fact in politics, sometimes the thing that will never happen actually starts to happen. And there have to be people who hold out for that, and who accept that they are idealists and that they are operating on principle as opposed to realpolitik. If there were no such ideals then our entire political sensibility would be corrupted by this process.

And maybe one of the jobs of theory or philosophy is to elevate principles that seem impossible, or that have the status of the impossible, to stand by them and will them, even when it looks highly unlikely that they’ll ever be realised. But that’s ok, it’s a service.

What would happen if we lived in a world where there were no people who did that? It would be an impoverished world.

P.S.

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<http://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/ray-filar/willing-impossible-interview-with-judith-butler>

* Correction: This article has been updated to reflect the fact that Judith Butler is no longer affiliated

with the Department of Rhetoric at the University of California.

Footnotes

[1] http://complit.berkeley.edu/?page_id=168

[2] <http://www.bdsmovement.net>

[3] <http://www.cup.columbia.edu/book/978-0-231-14610-4/>

[4] <http://thinkprogress.org/security/2013/04/17/1880131/kerry-two-state-solution/>

[5] <http://www.amazon.com/The-Question-Palestine-Edward-Said/dp/0679739882?tag=viglink123975-20>